

Reading Festival
Documenting New Initiatives in Primary Education, Birbhum
A Report

On November 18, 2011, the Pratichi (India) Trust launched the pilot for a new programme for primary school children. The programme, called “Boi Porar Utshob” or ‘Reading Festival’, is part of a collaborative project, *Documenting New Initiatives in Primary Schools* run by the Pratichi (India) Trust and Child Rights and You (CRY) in Birbhum. The reading festival invites children from various groups to a common venue, where they would read, write, draw, dance, sing and carry out activities of their own choice with complete freedom.

The first festival was held at Rabindra Shikkha Niketan, a primary school at Bolpur. Fifty children of Classes 3 and 4 from three local primary schools, Rabindra Shikkha Niketan (Bolpur), Kalikrishnapal Basic School (Bandhgora), and Nimno Bandhgora Primary School (Bandhgora) took part in it. Apart from the children, teachers of the schools above, as well as a few from other primary and secondary schools in the area also attended the programme. The District Primary School Council of Birbhum extended its cooperation to the event.

The reading festivals are divided into three parts. The first part is introductory: children introduced themselves to each other, especially to children from other schools, whom they may never have met. They are then divided into eight groups, and each group is provided with a learning tool, created like a puzzle. Some of the puzzles named popular local sweets and asked children to match each to a set of given categories (fried/unfried, syrupy/dry, made with cottage cheese/made from other things). Others matched names of relationships (‘ma’/’ammi’, ‘bua/pishi’) with their meanings (‘my mother’, ‘my father’s sister’), tradespeople with their work, animals with their categories, and so on. The children’s enthusiasm in solving these was remarkable. Working as a group, they finished the puzzles in less than ten minutes, and, upon completion, each group was congratulated by other groups with a big round of applause.

After this, a small library's worth of books for children was laid out on the ground, and the children took one each from the pile and went back to their groups. The enthusiasm, again, was palpable: after collecting books, the children ran back to their groups (some went across groups to their friends), started flipping through the pages, gazing at the pictures and enthusiastically talking with each other about the pictures or the story. While some finished reading the book quickly and exchanged with others to read a second book, some did not like the books they choose, as they had fewer pictures, and picked up another – a little brighter – book to read. Reading went on for an hour, and then, just as most children were beginning to get restive, a small break for 'fun' was announced. During this time, the children performed for each other. Many were encouraged to read out parts of the book they had been reading. Others sang and danced, or recited short poems they had learnt.

Lunch was then served around 1.30. At this festival, as with subsequent ones, children were very eager to help set the place, serve lunch to the 'guests' (the teachers from the other schools, the Pratichi team members), and clean up after lunch. The food – rice, daal, vegetables, egg curry and chutney – was declared delicious by every one, especially since, as a few children told us, it was shared with "so many new friends" on a day of "great fun".

After lunch, we put stacks of paper and colours on the teacher's table, and asked the children what they wanted to do next. Did they want to carry on reading? "Chobi ankbo!" was the enthusiastic cheer. They all wanted to draw. Each child was then provided with a drawing sheet, pencil and eraser. Many drew pictures of houses, rivers, trees, birds, and other things they come across in their everyday lives. Some of them copied the artwork in their books. Each group was then given two sets of colours, and asked to share it within the group. The resulting art was left with the children, either to decorate their classroom, or their own home with them.

The last part of the festival was devoted to collecting feedback from the children and the teachers. For the children, this was also an exercise in writing, one they were actually eager to participate in because the various didis and dadas (the Pratichi team members) seemed genuinely interested in what they had to say. Most children managed a few sentences on a sheet of paper,

but a few actually wrote a well-organised paragraph or two. There were some, however, who could not write very well at all, although their efforts were very useful in understanding the general areas of weakness.

For the children, over all, the festivals so far have become a day of joy and excitement, of meeting new people, making friends, reading stories, drawing, colouring, singing, dancing, and a bit of writing. Several children at different schools said it “felt like a picnic!”, and wanted us to come back “very very soon”. Amidst all this fun and laughter, however, it was disheartening to see quite a few of the children struggling to match their eagerness with ability. Some of them lacked fluency in reading. Others had not been able to master the alphabets completely. Yet others had to focus so hard on spelling that they lost track of their thoughts while writing, resulting in fractured sentences. The variation in reading/writing ability can be attributed to many factors. Differences in the functioning of the schools, their socio-economic constraints and compulsions (many of these children accompany their parents during their phases of migratory labour), lack of proper nutrition, and so on. However, as we have also seen, changes in practices of schooling and socially unbiased, dedicated teachers open to innovative pedagogy compensates for a great deal of structural lacks in these children’s education.

The good thing – the wonderful thing, in fact – was the way in which all of these children stuck to reading and writing, asking their neighbours if need be, but never giving up. Their delight at being given the books to take home and read, was transparent. This directly contradicts the claim that ‘children these days’ don’t want to read. It also puts paid to the upper-class/caste assumption that ‘these children’ are simply not capable of intellectual pursuits, and are destined for a life of hard manual labour, like their parents. In other ways, the reading festivals validate many of the ideas on which current trends in school education reform is based, and thus will hopefully be used to support their implementations in our schools.